

VZCZCXRO7899
OO RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHNE #5119/01 3321332
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 281332Z NOV 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9462
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0215
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA 1318
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 5703

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 005119

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV PHUM PREL KISL ASEC BG IN](#)

SUBJECT: AUTHOR TASLIMA NASREEN: PAWN IN POLITICAL WEB

REF: A. KOLKATA 359

[1](#)B. KOLKATA 356

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Claiming that the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) pushed her to leave Kolkata (ref A), controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen finally settled in a "safe place" in Delhi under the security of the Indian central government. Her flight from Kolkata sparked a political firestorm, with the BJP offering her sanctuary and the CPM, ironically, being seen as anti-secular. After a pounding in the media and the opposition for initially looking the other way during Nasreen's flight, the UPA finally agreed on November 28 to provide her safe shelter in India provided she not engage in political activities. Congress and the CPM continued to snipe at each other while searching for a solution that does not offend their all-important Muslim vote bank. The CPM is being accused by some of manufacturing the controversy in order to drive Nandigram out of the front pages. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has claimed the secular high ground calling for Nasreen to receive a permanent visa. Adding a farcical tinge to the controversy, noted Muslim-bashing Gujarat BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi has even jumped on the bandwagon, offering Nasreen protection in his state.

[1](#)2. (SBU) While on the defensive, the CPM believes this is an easier issue to handle in Parliament than Nandigram, and is probably quietly relieved that her case has pushed the Nandigram massacres from the front page. The Congress wants to push the issue under the rug. The BJP holds the upper hand and will milk the controversy dry. As for the author, she has said Kolkata is her home and she would prefer to live there, but the CPM, it seems, despite its high-minded rhetoric about looking after the little guy, has no space in that teeming city for a female author fleeing an unjust fatwa and threats to her life in Bangladesh. In the end, this episode further exposes the CPM for the hypocritical authoritarians that they really are. End Summary

Intolerance Rears its Ugly Head
- - - - -

[1](#)3. (U) The storm surrounding controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen began on November 21, a few days after the Nandigram killings (ref B). Nasreen and Nandigram became linked after All India Minorities Forum president Idris Ali led a protest against CPM's actions in Nandigram and demanded Nasreen's Indian visa be revoked for what he claimed were her anti-Islamic writings. Protesters fought a pitched battle with Kolkata police causing numerous injuries but no

fatalities. To quell the violence, the CPM government of West Bengal (GOWB) called for Nasreen to "leave the state." (Note: Nasreen, who travels on a Swedish passport, faces death threats from fundamentalists in Bangladesh, her country of birth, for her writings. Her Indian visa expires February 17, 2008).

The CPM Abandons Her to Her Fate

- - - - -

¶4. (U) On November 22, with the facilitation of GOWB officials and ironically wearing a burqa, Nasreen left Kolkata for Jaipur. However, she only stayed in Rajasthan one day as the Muslim group All India Milia Council threatened protests in the city. Fearing violence, the Rajasthan government transferred Nasreen to its guest house in Delhi on November 24. She remained there until her security was handed over to the central government which promptly moved Nasreen to an undisclosed "safe place," reportedly the National Security Guards Complex a few miles south of Delhi. The Taslima Nasreen issue came up at a November 27 meeting of the Union Cabinet, which made the decision to move Nasreen from Rajasthan House to a safer venue.

The Government Finally Does the Right Thing (Sort Of)

- - - - -

¶5. (U) After a pounding from civil activists and the BJP, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, noting that India has "never refused shelter to those who have come and sought our protection" assured Parliament on November 28 that India would allow Nasreen to stay in India. He urged, however, that Nasreen not indulge in activities and actions that "hurt

NEW DELHI 00005119 002 OF 003

the sentiments" of Indians or mar India's relations with other countries.

Taslima's Version: Wait for Her Next Book

- - - - -

¶6. (U) For her part, Nasreen has not explained the exact circumstances of her journey from Kolkata to Jaipur to Delhi. Initially she told the press, "I was asked to go to Rajasthan but why I was asked to go and by whom, let us not speak about this." However, she did allow later that certain top officials of the Kolkata police, "put pressure on me; I was driven out." She has stated that she wants to return to Kolkata, saying, "I want to go back to the city and start my life afresh, returning to my writing. I am missing home intensely." She has not been shy in talking to the media, with most national newspapers getting juicy quotes from her. Nasreen has been in exile from Bangladesh for at least 13 years and has lived in Kolkata for more than three years.

Let the Politics Begin

- - - - -

¶7. (U) Amidst heavy criticism from the BJP, the CPM has tried to downplay the issue and shift the onus for any decision on Nasreen's final status to the Congress-led UPA government. When asked about Nasreen, politburo member Sitaram Yechury evaded responsibility: "Whether she should remain in India or not and whether her visa should be extended or not is a decision to be taken by the central government. It is beyond the scope of any state government. Let the central government decide on this," Yechury said.

Congress Neither Secular nor Courageous

- - - - -

¶8. (U) Despite Pranab Mukerjee's statement in Parliament, the damage had been done for the Congress Party. It came under heavy attack from the BJP for the "silence" on the affair from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and party president

Sonia Gandhi. The Congress Party has tried to deflect blame to the CPM. Congress spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi relayed that when the central government last extended Nasreen's visa, it was only over several objections from the CPM Bengal government. But the Congress, too, refused to answer direct questions about Nasreen's status until the Mukherjee statement in Parliament.

BJP Opportunistic and Exploitative

¶9. (U) The BJP has hammered the Congress Party and, especially, the CPM, accusing both of caving to Islamic fundamentalists to pander to the Muslim vote bank. "It is a shame for the entire nation that Taslima Nasreen is made to run for her life after she was granted shelter and visa to stay in the country," said V.K. Malhotra, BJP's Deputy Leader in the Lok Sabha. The BJP is demanding that Nasreen be treated as a political refugee and receive a permanent visa. Jumping on the bandwagon while pursuing his reelection campaign, Gujarat Chief Minister Modi invited Nasreen to Gujarat, boasting, "I have the courage to protect her." Hindu nationalist party Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's chief K.S. Sudarshan has also offered to host Nasreen.

Comment: BJP Ahead, but Nandigram off the Front Page

¶10. (SBU) At a recent book release event in Delhi, Chandan Mitra, editor of the Pioneer newspaper, castigated the CPM for its treatment of Nasreen. He accused the CPM of blatantly creating a "Nasreen issue" by deporting her from the state to push the Nandigram controversy out of the national spotlight. The strategy appears to have worked, and not only for the CPM's benefit. Nandigram had become a political liability for the Congress due to its refusal to condemn openly its CPM ally for their brutal actions. This incident also suggests that there are many within the Congress including FM Mukherjee, for example) who share substantive political views with the CPM.

¶11. (SBU) After Nandigram, Nasreen represented a convenient foil for both the CPM and fundamentalist Muslim leaders in Kolkata. From their actions (or lack thereof), it is clear

NEW DELHI 00005119 003 OF 003

India's main political parties could not care less about Nasreen or her writing beyond how their parties' reactions to events play to voters. Not wanting to offend the Muslim vote bank, neither Congress nor CPM has officially supported an extension of Nasreen's visa. Both parties want the situation to go away. The BJP will ensure that will not happen by raising the issue in Parliament to batter both the CPM and Congress and to burnish their own tarnished secular credentials. The BJP has seized the high ground and will milk the controversy for all it's worth. For Taslima, the last week has been chaotic, but will no doubt provide ample material for her next book. As for the CPM, the public are increasingly aware that their lofty rhetoric about looking out for the little guy rings hollow, since they have stooped recently not only to kill peasants at Nandigram but to abandon a female author in order to pander to vote banks. Surely they could have found space for one woman in a teeming city of 16 million?

MULFORD